

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Becoming a mother: a study exploring occupational change in first-time motherhood

### Journal Item

#### How to cite:

Horne, Jane; Corr, Susan and Earle, Sarah (2005). Becoming a mother: a study exploring occupational change in first-time motherhood. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 12(3) pp. 176–183.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.jos.edu.au/searchresults.asp?sfor=Author&squery=Horne>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## **Becoming a Mother: A Study Exploring Occupational Change in First Time Motherhood**

***Jane Horne, Susan Corr and Sarah Earle***

Jane Horne BSc (Hons) OT, is practicing as an Occupational Therapist at the Queens Medical Centre, Nottingham, England. Whilst an undergraduate student at University College Northampton she 'became a mother' of two sons.

Dr Susan Corr, is a Reader in Occupational Science at University College Northampton in the United Kingdom. Her research interests include occupational science, stroke rehabilitation and service evaluation.

Dr Sarah Earle is a Lecturer at the Open University, United Kingdom. Her research interests include women's reproductive health, disability, and the sociology of sexuality.

### **Contact address:**

Jane Horne  
University Hospital NHS Trust  
Occupational Therapy Department  
A Floor  
East Block  
Derby Road  
Nottingham  
NG7 2UH, UK  
Phone: 0115 9816788  
Email: [Jane@8chantrey.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:Jane@8chantrey.freeserve.co.uk)

### **Keywords**

Motherhood; Occupational Change; Productivity Activities; Adaptation.

# **Becoming a Mother: A Study Exploring Occupational Change in First Time Motherhood**

## **Abstract**

Having a first baby is considered a major life event, due to significant role change impacting on the ordinary and familiar activities the new mother performs every day. The aim of this study was to explore changes in the occupational lives of first time mothers. A concurrent nested strategy of enquiry was used. Quantitative data via the Modified Interest Checklist and the Role Checklist was nested within the predominantly qualitative data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews. Six first time mothers, who were two and a half years post motherhood and aged between 28 and 42 years, participated in this study. The findings indicate that 'new mothers' engaging in a balanced lifestyle pre-motherhood in the areas of self-care, leisure, productivity and rest experience a period of occupational disruption and occupational imbalance before adapting into motherhood through activities, tasks and finally occupations. These mothers' occupational lives are productivity dominant with most of their time being spent in paid employment and/or performing homecare/family care activities. Their occupational lives are also obligatory dominant, for example, they are performing activities they need to do to enable them to fulfil their role as mother, as opposed to activities they choose to do. Also evident is a daily process of change as individuals adapt into motherhood.

## **Introduction**

'There is only one way to find out how women **actually** experience motherhood, and that's by listening to what they have to say.' (Oakley, 1997)

Many studies in the social sciences have focused on experiences of motherhood. However, very few studies have explored the occupational changes that occur in the process of becoming a mother. Role change for new mothers often occurs overnight resulting in unfamiliar, and frequently unexpected, patterns of occupational engagement. The aim of this study was to identify first time mothers' patterns of occupational engagement, and to explore how 'becoming a mother' can change women's occupational lives, both in the short and the longer term.

Professional literature examining the concept of occupation, the impact of occupation and occupational change were chosen as a framework for the literature review. In addition, psychological, sociological and occupational aspects of motherhood were also examined. It was felt this was the most appropriate literature to inform an occupationally focused study.

## **Motherhood and occupational change**

### *'Doing' and 'becoming'*

The need to "do" is uniquely human (Wilcock 1993; Kielhofner 2002; Lamport et al 2001) and individuals typically engage in a range of self-care, leisure, productivity (work) and rest activities. Wilcock (1998) asserts that an understanding of the concept of occupation should include "all the things people do, the relationship of what they do to who they are as human beings, and that through occupation they are in a constant state of becoming different" (p248). In "doing" argues Wilcock (1998) humans participate in daily tasks which involve "things they must do" and "things they want to do" (p248). It is also suggested that when we "do" we "become". For example, Kielhofner (2002), suggests:

“When we work, play and perform activities of daily living we shape our capacities, our patterns of living and interacting with others, and our comprehension of our world and ourselves. To a large extent, we each author our own development through what we do” (p145).

Turner (2002, p26) emphasises “there can be no such thing as universally meaningful or purposeful occupations”. So, if a new mother defines an activity, such as changing a nappy, as meaningful and purposeful, this occupation would contribute to establishing her place in society and the world (Kielhofner 2002). Occupation is therefore unique to the individual, as it is defined by the individual him or herself.

### *Choice, occupation and change*

A deep-rooted belief within the profession of occupational therapy is that a balance between the ability to, look after oneself (self-care), contribute to society and be economically active (productivity), while also enjoying life and having fun (leisure) maintains health and well-being (Zemke and Clark 1996; Reed and Sanderson 1999; Turner 2002). Whilst many factors are known to limit individual choice, fundamentally it is argued that adults have the ability to control the balance of their occupations (Turner 2002). Engaging in a balance of occupations does not “imply equal amounts of clock time”, Reed and Sanderson, (1999 p34) but that “some time in all activities on a regularly occurring basis” is likely to maintain a person’s health and well-being (Wilcock 1998). Motherhood may be one factor limiting adult choice and therefore, may prevent the opportunity for a new mother to engage in a balanced lifestyle.

The arrival of a new baby will inevitably impact on the new mothers habits and routines. Self-care activities, for example, are often conducted in private and an individual is likely to have a particular way of performing these activities (Turner, 2002; Kielhofner 2002). The privacy of a bathroom or shower room may no longer be an option, with the responsibility of caring for a baby. Similarly, the time spent on these activities is also likely to be reduced.

Another regular habit/routine pertinent to this study, is rest/sleep patterns. Due to the needs of a new baby, these will alter. Sleep is determined, like any occupation, by the individual. Most British people sleep for seven to eight hours daily while others, for example, Margaret Thatcher, reportedly only sleep for four hours daily (Horne 1997, Campbell 2001, Turner 2002). Horne (1997 p1) asserts 'a certain amount of sleep is vital, but we can easily consume more than we really need, just because we can.' This suggests habitual individual patterns occur over time.

Motherhood impacts on productivity activities. In Britain, the majority of working women receive maternity benefit. This is a factor in enabling new mothers to spend time with their babies, prior to returning to the workplace. Productivity is more than participating in paid and unpaid work. For example, through productivity individuals contribute to their economic community (Turner, 2002). Kielhofner (2002 p1) defines this area as "work" referring to "activities that provide services or commodities to others, such as ideas, knowledge, help". Typical productivity occupations, would include, paid employment, volunteering, and housework and caring for members of the family (preparing food, bathing a baby). It is likely that different productivity activities are engaged in pre and post motherhood, short term at least.

To engage in a balance lifestyle, leisure is considered an important component. Leisure occupations are engaged in for pleasure (Turner 2002) also referred to as "play" in some texts (Zemke and Clarke 1996; Kielhofner 2002). However, if the process of becoming new mothers encompasses a magnitude of change (Barclay et al 1997), then retaining participation in leisure activities may not be identified as a priority.

### *Motherhood and self-identity*

Christiansen's (1999) work on the relationship between occupation and self-identity has important implications for a new mother. A new mother will usually be involved in a range of occupations associated with caring for her baby which will undoubtedly impact on her self-identity:

“Occupations are key not just to being a person, but to being a particular person, and thus creating and maintaining an identity. Occupations come together within the contexts of our relationships with others to provide us with a sense of purpose and structure in our day-to-day activities, as well as over time. When we build our identities through occupations, we provide ourselves with the contexts necessary for creating meaningful lives, and life meaning helps us to be well” (p550).

In a qualitative Australian study by Rogan et al (1997) based on 55 interviews one first-time mother is described as feeling 'disconnected' from herself; “It's like I'm watching a film - this isn't my life anymore - it's somebody else's” she says (p. 881). Numerous studies on women's perceptions of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding also show that women can feel 'disembodied', or disconnected and find it difficult to negotiate an identity between the pre-motherhood and post-natal selves (Earle, 2002; Woodward, 1997). Kaufman (1988), in a qualitative study of 64 stroke survivors, found that activities were often the source through which people reconstruct their lives whilst adapting to life events. The results indicated that through the ability to engage in former pursuits, participants felt they were still the same kind of person they had always been. This suggests that if occupations enable us to form our identity, then a change in occupation could result in a change of identity. This may, argues Christiansen (1999), not only influence our own life, but because our lives are “socially interconnected” may also influence the lives of others.

### *Self-identity and occupational roles*

Roles and responsibilities are components of our self-identity. Kielhofner (2002)

suggests:

“We identify with our roles in part because we see ourselves reflected in the attitudes and actions of others towards us. Consequently, role identity is generated when others recognise and respond to us as occupying a particular status” (p72).

He also asserts that roles provide a means for individual needs to be met and argues that by participating in occupational role behaviours, an individual is likely to elicit purpose, structure and regularity in their life. A great deal of what we do in our everyday life mirrors what we have done before (Kielhofner, 2002). Routines are actions carried out automatically without planning or reflection on what is being done (Kielhofner, 2002). Kielhofner argues, routine and habit also influence how time is used. This suggests being out of normal everyday routine, additional effort and concentration needs to be applied to everyday activities and use of time.

The role of ‘new parent’ is considered as the second major new role acquisition in early adulthood, the first being the acquisition of a partner (Atkinson et al 1990; Bee 1998). Contributing factors are likely to be the changing occupational demands and occupational imbalance that motherhood entails. The previous sections of this literature review has identified some of these demands/imbbalances, for example, a changed environment and possible reduced time (including sleep) when conducting self care activities. In addition, a new mother will have limited opportunities to engage in leisure occupations. Perhaps some of these issues have been identified by Larson (2000 p250) when she suggests that the role of mother in contemporary society is changing and asserts “mothers may no longer be able to do it all”. To be a mother presents difficult challenges “mothers may be torn between creating the desired family life, meeting the competing demands of work, and making best use of time and



resources" (op cit p250). Given that there are so many components embedded in the role of 'new mother,' it is perhaps inevitable that occupational changes occur.

Whiteford (2000) suggests a life event such as having a baby, restricts a new mother's opportunities to engage in meaningful occupation. She asserts that "occupational disruption occurs when a person's normal pattern of occupational engagement is disrupted due to a significant life event" (p201). Even though, for most, new motherhood is intensely meaningful, the role of new mother, may unexpectedly supersede other meaningful roles? Therefore during the initial period post birth when the mother is acquiring skills occupational disruption may occurs. The key issue, Whiteford (2000) asserts is that occupational disruption "is a temporary state and one that given supportive conditions, resolves itself" (p201). A new mother, having been a "worker" for many years, temporarily, at least, loses this role, whilst extending the role of "homemaker" and gaining the role of "mother" and is likely to experience "transformational change", a process described by Kielhofner (2002, p147).

Change is an ongoing process throughout the life span (Kielhofner 2002). The successful management of change, argues Turner et al. (1996), "is dependent upon understanding the need and processes of change; the underlying conflicts and problems created by change and methods of developing coping mechanisms" (p349). Therefore, every new mother is likely to adapt into motherhood differently and over varying periods of time.

Blair (2000 p234) suggests that humans adapt by doing things, that "action facilitates change, personal development and consequent well-being". Through occupation therefore, a new mother is likely to adapt and adjust into her new role as "mother". An adaptive response argue Reed and Sanderson (1999) "is not truly adaptive until it

is incorporated into recurring or daily life” (p79). It is suggested that adaptation “provides its own reward: thus, an adapting response is self-reinforcing” (op cit p79). Yerxa (2000) also support this view by stating that a person “has resources and strengths which, when actualised through occupation, enable an adaptive response to environmental challenges in a culturally congruent way” (p195).

## **Method**

A mixed method design was used. Quantitative data were embedded in the predominantly qualitative data, in order to obtain a wider perspective into the patterns of occupational engagement that occurs when becoming a mother. The two types of data were collected during a single phase, providing the study with advantages from both methods (Creswell, 2003). A quantitative approach was used to provide a numerical indication of engagement in various activities whereas a qualitative approach was used to explore the meanings women ascribe to these. Whilst quantitative approaches allow for easy comparisons to be made between women, a qualitative approach offers a richer focus on understanding the social world from the point of view of those participating in the study (Green and Thorogood, 2004)

### *The study group*

Six first time mothers aged between 28-42 participated in this study, all meeting the criteria of having a first baby in the year 2000. Participants were recruited from ante-natal groups, which had also been attended by the lead researcher (first author). All participants have been given pseudonyms and the names of their children have been deliberately excluded from the reported data. Participation was at two and a half years post natally, as the study sought to explore occupational change in relation to both the short and longer term. Lone mothers and those with more than one child were excluded as it was felt that these differences could vary the results in relation to

women's engagement in activity; it is recognised that further study of these differences in future research would be of value.

### *Ethical issues*

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Centre for Healthcare Education Ethics Panel, University College Northampton. A participant information sheet which included the aim and purpose of the study was posted to potential participants with an invitation to participate in the study. Participants contacted the researcher if they wished to be involved and subsequently interviews were arranged. Instruments were distributed with a consent form, which reinforced participant's right to withdraw. It was made clear to the participants all material collected for the purpose of the study would remain strictly confidential. Only material collected through this process was used in this study.

### *Qualitative methods and analysis*

The literature highlights that both the concept of occupation and the process of becoming a mother are complex issues. It was, therefore, felt that the principal method of enquiry should be qualitative, enabling the researcher to capture the complexity of the emerging issues (Bowling 1997). Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews to obtain a rich understanding of women's occupational lives. Whilst quantitative methods are useful in providing a broad overview of women's occupational change, qualitative methods can tell us more about why these changes have taken place and what these changes mean to women themselves.

Content analysis of the interview data was carried out by organising the data into meaningful themes. The emerging themes were then labelled and organised into categories. The final phase of data analysis involved identifying and highlighting

"diverse quotations" and "specific evidence", as advocated by Creswell (2003 p194). Advocated by Mays and Pope (1996), this systematic method of analysis aimed to ensure the interpretation of the raw data was based on evidence and not impressionistic. A second coder was recruited to check the transcripts to ensure rigour, and reduce error and bias.

### *Quantitative methods and analysis*

Quantitative data were collected using two different tools: the Modified Interest Checklist and the Role Checklist. These tools were chosen because as well as providing additional descriptive information for the study, they were designed to give insightful information regarding individuals occupational lives. The Modified Interest Checklist (Kielhofner and Neville 1983) was used to identify participants pattern of interests pre and post-natally. This checklist requires participants to indicate their engagement in 68 activities. The Role Checklist is a reliable and valid self-report instrument (Kielhofner 1985) and was used to collect information about an individual's perception of their participation in life roles and the value placed on these roles. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse this data.

## **Results**

Six mothers took part in this study (Table 1) and their average age was 33.5 years. All described themselves as White British and all were married. With the exception of one respondent all were in paid employment at the time of the interview, although only one respondent worked full-time.

The data from the Modified Interest Checklist (see Table 2) indicates changes in interests. All 68 activities were engaged in by at least one participant pre-motherhood. Post-motherhood 22 activities were no longer being participated in.

Watching television, driving, cooking and shopping were participated in by all six participants both pre and post motherhood. Attending parties, pubs, concerts and plays were popular interests pre-motherhood, but there was less engagement in these post-natally. Several of the most popular interests pursued post-motherhood were those typically carried out in the home such as gardening, housecleaning, watching television, ironing, cooking and child care. Notably, these are activities typically characterised as 'women's work' therefore it is not unusual for these activities to be regularly carried out by women, regardless of their parenting status (Doyal, 1999).

The Role Checklist indicated that participants were performing an average of six roles at the time the research was conducted, as opposed to seven in the past, and indicated a preference for seven in the future (Table 3). The role of friend, family member and home maintainer were the most consistently held roles and among the most highly valued. The role of student and volunteer were the roles most likely to be put on hold after childbirth even though a high value was placed on these roles by four out of the six participants. Only one participant was performing the role of caregiver pre-motherhood (supporting an ill parent), post-natally six participants were performing this role and five considered it to be very valuable. Four participants indicated they would like to continue performing this role in the future.

Six themes emerged from the interview data in relation to women's perception of occupational change in the process of becoming a first time mother. These were: occupational engagement pre-motherhood; being 'shell-shocked' with the new mothering role; being a mother; changes in occupations; adapting into motherhood; and, a balanced lifestyle.

### *Occupational engagement pre-motherhood*

The data indicate that occupational engagement pre-motherhood was different to that after childbirth. Participants indicated involvement in self-care, productivity and leisure occupations prior to having their baby. Common self care activities included having a shower, putting on make-up, eating breakfast and getting dressed. However, such activities were often curtailed after the birth of a first baby, as Debbie explains:

‘I would have a shower, wash my hair, probably flit around in a dressing gown, and come down for breakfast. This would be on a work morning or a weekend morning...I suppose I never realised how important that time was, until it was taken away.’

Sarah’s self care routines included activities in the evening:

‘I used to have a shower in the morning and probably a bath in the evening with candles and a glass of wine, part of my relaxation.’

Typically, participants described nine hours of sleep per night and stated that this did increase at the weekend. All six participants undertook full time, paid employment although Jenny was made redundant three months before the birth of her baby. All participants indicated that their [paid] worker role was important prior to having their first baby and they suggested that they worked ‘long hours’. One participant recounted she was ‘consumed by work’ whilst another stated ‘once you are in work mode everything else goes out of the window’ indicating this role formed a major part of the participants pre-motherhood life. All six participants described a lifestyle that involved active engagement in leisure occupations. Sarah stated:

‘Theatre, cinema, clubs er, dining out, everything, there wasn’t anything we didn’t do.’

Melanie also outlined her leisure occupations pre-motherhood:

'I used to go horse riding every weekend, and spend the evening with friends. We would always be quite busy doing things, playing golf - I used to play golf, go to the gym and go walking.'

In addition, participants described 'weekends away with friends' and 'going to the pub' as leisure occupations which they considered important.

### *Feeling 'shell-shocked'*

All of the women interviewed described the period of early motherhood as being a difficult one in relation to the new roles and activities that were required of them. For example, all participants recalled memories of being out of routine after the birth of their babies and feeling 'shell-shocked' with their new role. For example, Melanie stated:

'Routines immediately after we had 'baby'? Well it is kind of disrupted and then you get back to some sort of normality don't you? (pause) eventually.'

Debbie recalled the initial period after the birth, as being a 'complete blur' and talked about activities being 'completely, absolutely and utterly' centred on the baby.

'I can remember planning to phone my mother at a certain time in the evening, because I knew that would be a time where I would be able to sit down and give her ten minutes of my time, without a screaming baby needing to be changed, or fed, or entertained or rocked to sleep, or winded. It was completely . . . well, our lives just revolved around 'baby' for the first few weeks.'

Continuing with this theme, Melanie outlined a loss of independence:

'You have no independence of any kind, you are totally beholden to this tiny baby..and it's really hard work..and not getting any sleep. You don't really know what to do with it. It is just getting used to it and desperately trying to get into some routine, of some kind. But you realise it's not you that drives the routines, it is the baby.'

Another consistent theme which emerged in relation to the early post-natal period for all participants was that of uncertainty and bewilderment. Although Sinead described her new role as 'quite nice', as her main role consisted of 'feeding baby and sleeping'. She stated '...husband was great, he did all the things that needed doing, like the meals (pause) and taking the baby downstairs, so I could have more sleep.

However, she also expressed:

'We [participant and husband] hadn't got a clue what we were doing really.'

All participants identified a lack of time for anything other than the baby. One participant stated her breakfast was still in the toaster when her husband returned from work, citing 'time' as the reason for not eating, whilst Sinead stated:

'I think basically everything revolved around 'baby'. Quite obsessively really.'

Sarah referred to feeling 'sheer exhaustion' whilst Melanie cited 'lack of sleep' as a difficult factor in the early days of their new role. As Sarah states when discussing the social activities she had to give up after having her baby:

'I did resent it. (pause) I don't now as time has gone on.'

The data suggest that early motherhood is a period of change during which many daily activities revolve around the baby and performing the role of mothering.

### *Being a mother*

Being a mother resulted in different routines. Common activities identified were preparing and eating meals, walking, daytime television, washing, other household tasks, and changing nappies. Debbie stated:



‘I never used to sit down and put my feet up. I now know I should have done. I wanted the house to be tidy and washing needed to be done, and that was really how the day would go.’

Melanie, reflecting on her routines over that period, stated:

‘I think it took a while, I really do, after about six weeks I felt like I was getting some element of control, but it was very subtle.’

Melanie’s response suggests that gradually she is developing her performance in her new role. Melanie perhaps offers an explanation of how activity is helping her to achieve this:

‘Something that stands out in my memory is going along to the mother and baby group. I actually went out. There was a lot of nervousness, but I went out by myself, with the baby and discovered I could have a life outside the house.’

Factors such as bad weather contributed to ‘difficult days’ during the first six months of motherhood, when participants were not able to go out with their baby, thus further limiting their choice of activity. One participant could not remember any difficult days:

‘There isn’t one day that stands out. She [baby] was quite easy to look after.’

In contrast, on perceived ‘good days’ participants stated going for walks and connecting with other mothers engaging in similar activities. Sarah indicated a good day was engaging in leisure activities with baby. A trip to the local farm was described:

‘...he (baby) grabbed it (laughs) and squeezed this little mouse. I nearly had a heart attack. I think that was the closest I ever felt, I

mean, I bonded with 'baby' from day one but that day we really connected, it was a really good day. Fun.'

The data suggest that 'being a mother' consists of activities revolving around the care of a baby. These activities include homemaking tasks, as well as being involved in child-centred leisure activities, for example attending mother and baby groups, or local day trips.

### *Changes in occupations*

The data indicate clear changes in occupations, in particular, that the time spent engaging in self-care activities, other than a basic daily hygiene routine, was of little importance to the majority of participants at the time of the interviews. Evidence of such changes in occupations were highlighted by both Debbie and Sarah:

'It's harder now to be able to have a shower without being disturbed, or poked with a toy, or have the hot taps turned on or off, or a book thrown into the bath whilst I'm trying to have a shower.'

'I rarely have a bath, because [the baby] wants to come in with me. Certainly no candles and certainly not a glass of wine. Sounds all doom and gloom doesn't it? (laughs)

Whilst these responses indicate there has been a significant change in the manner in which these activities are performed there also appears to be a change in the level of importance placed on these activities. Debbie states:

'I can't say I spend over two and a half hours looking after myself...I know that is really important, but, it just isn't happening at the moment. To be honest, I know it will again and I am happy with what is happening at the moment.'

Four participants have reduced their hours to part time working since returning to paid employment after maternity leave indicating an element of choice over obligatory occupations. Debbie reported:

‘I used to be quite ambitious as a teacher and wanting more than I am at the moment, but for now that has been shelved. (pause) Because I know that I couldn’t possibly give the time that it would need to be able to do the job properly and juggle the home life as well.’

Melanie having returned to paid employment full time stated:

‘The reason that I didn’t go down to part-time after ‘baby’ was that I thought perhaps people wouldn’t take you seriously. Certainly in my field, I feel they don’t. But I think things are changing a little bit.’

Jenny did not return to paid employment but states that she structures her week quite rigorously, describing participation in activities outside the home four days a week, and had visitors on the fifth day. The findings indicate changes in role performance.

Debbie referred to her worker role:

‘I have to leave at a set time, from work, to be able to pick [child] up from nursery, or to be able to get home in time to see him before bath and bed. That sort of, takes priority over the hours I spend at school.’

Although Debbie still considers her worker role to be important, she is now making decisions about what she ‘does’ and ‘does not do’ in her role as teacher in order to fulfil another role in her life which she also considers important. Whilst hours in paid employment were reduced post-natally, for all participants the importance of some kind of productivity occupation seemed evident.

### *Adapting into motherhood*

Two and a half years post-natally, participants indicate they have adapted into the role of mother, and describe what is important to them now. Melanie, for example, has established boundaries and states:

‘I will do anything except work late and miss [my child’s] bedtime.’

Sharon also seems to have reorganised her priorities and has engaged in a period of self-reflection:

‘Although she [child] is my world and I would do anything for her, I think me as a person, I am just starting to reconsider me. Up to now I’ve not been bothered....’.

Sharon, having adapted into her new role, appears to now be looking beyond the role of ‘mother’ in order to further develop or re-establish her self-identity. She states:

...‘I’m getting to the point now where I want more for me. ....now I’m looking at me and looking where I am going. I have got this lovely daughter, lovely husband, but there is me. Two and a half years is a long time and I haven’t really thought about what I want to do.”

Debbie also describes some adaptation to her mothering role:

‘I am beginning to feel more relaxed now than I have been since having [child].’

Whilst Sinead’s comments reflected the majority view when she states:

‘We don’t go out in the evening that much, I can’t say I really miss it either.’

Melanie gives another example of how she has adapted into the role of mother and re-established her occupational life:

It’s funny because I thought we haven’t changed that much [in terms of what we do], we did used to do a lot of stuff at weekends which we don’t do now like golf and riding, and a bit more stuff with friends, they were really important weekends for us, they are not for me now, not at all. We don’t go down town unless we have to. I think that was just time filler before we had [child]. We just had time on our hands. Whereas now, we are running around doing jobs that need doing and taking [child] to the park and Zoo and things like that.’

Adaptation into motherhood appears to involve reflection on the activities involved in mothering a child and on the activities engaged in pre-motherhood. The data suggest a more relaxed approach and a renegotiation of activities in the longer term.

### *Finding a balance*

The interview data suggest that a shift in balance between activities occurring after childbirth. Pre-motherhood, all participants spent most of their time engaged in productivity occupations. However, once they had become mothers, the majority of participants were interested in renegotiating the balance between home and work.

Participants who returned to paid *part-time* – rather than full-time - employment after having a baby used words such as ‘great’, ‘about right’ and ‘perfect’ when describing the balance of activities in their life in relation to engagement paid work. Melanie, who worked full time was anxious with the balance of activities in her life, stating that she would:

‘ideally like to work less, if I felt I could still get on at work. I actually feel [the baby] is at nursery too much.’

Jenny, who chooses not to work in paid employment, was also very satisfied with the balance of her activities, although she felt anxious about not being in paid employment. She said:

‘I sometimes feel a bit guilty about not bringing any money in.’

All participants described productivity occupations in and around the home as being valuable. Sharon describes how time spent engaging in productivity occupations in the home has increased:

‘..because from the moment you are awake, you are, you know, being a mother and you start your jobs, whether you are going to work or staying at home to look after your child.’

Although the majority of respondents were satisfied with the extent of their engagement in paid employment, most felt that although leisure activities were important, a lack of time prevented them from engaging in leisure. For example, Sharon states:

‘I allow very little time for leisure’

When asked to talk about their leisure activities, all six participants followed the word leisure with a laugh or a smile. Jenny, for example, defines leisure as:

‘..probably means going to the gym and sporty things like that? Oh no, I don’t do that anymore.’

These comments initially appear to be at odds with the data collected using the Modified Interests Checklist. Here, the results indicate that women are still currently engaged in what could be described as ‘leisure’, for example, gardening, reading and home decorating. It is not clear whether these interests are engaged in purely for

reasons of productivity, or for some other reason. However, what is clear from the comment made by Jenny above, is that not all forms of leisure are perceived as equal.

Participants do appear to be identifying 'a gap' in leisure occupations and it is likely this perceived 'gap' is due to the additional role of new mother and the responsibilities the role entails. There is also evidence to suggest that women attempt to find a balance between home and work and between the activities of mothering and other activities which do not fall within this role.

## **Discussion**

The findings from both data collection methods indicate engagement in a range of occupations pre-motherhood. The participants described routines which relate to their own particular way of 'doing' familiar activities, most likely at an automatic level (Kielhofner 2002). The participants were not asked about their perception of balance of occupations pre-motherhood but their indication of levels of participation from both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest an engagement in different types of occupations.

Research consistently highlights that the maintenance of social relationships is important to women's well being (see, for example, Blaxter 1990). It is not surprising then, that in relation to occupations pre-motherhood, participants consistently referred to engagement in leisure occupations that revolved around friendship and social activity.

The findings suggest that the 'ordinary and familiar things that people do everyday' (AOTA 1995 p1015) were disrupted immediately after the baby was born. Prior to

this event participants were going to the gym, to parties, reading and going to the cinema in their leisure time; working in paid employment in excess of 37 hours per week; putting on make-up; having relaxing showers and baths in the morning/evening, whilst choosing to have up to ten hours sleep per night. It is perhaps not surprising one new mother, when reflecting on this period of her life (six weeks post birth), described how she felt: 'Shell shocked'. These findings are similar to those of Rogan et al (1997) who found that first time mothers felt 'disconnected.'. Kielhofner (2002) describes such a process as 'transformational change' and suggests that 'modification of one's identity and competence is required' (p147). Thus, in the short term, becoming a mother does appear to significantly change the occupational lives of first time mothers.

The findings suggest a period of possible occupational imbalance for new mothers. That is an imbalance between occupations that they were *choosing* to do and occupations they were *obliged* to engage in (Wilcock et al 1997). This study found that there were many obligations required to fulfil the role of new mother. Participants were engaging in unfamiliar activities such as, bathing baby, changing a nappy, feeding baby, and entertaining baby while also indicating that they were 'so tired' through lack of sleep. The relationship between the role of new mother and her occupations therefore, appear to be 'indivisible' as argued by Turner (2002). The findings support Oakley (1980) who found that first time mothers experience enormous disruptions to life styles, routines and identities and that is in effect, a state of occupational disruption.

The data suggest that the process of becoming a mother involves engagement in activities that are unfamiliar, as well as a restriction in the choice of activities available to women. It is, therefore, not surprising that the process of adjustment into motherhood is described by four out of six participants as 'difficult'. In this study,



women describe how it is the baby who drives routines, leading to feelings of tiredness, and bewilderment, especially in the short-term. Studies of older people have found that people function better, when they have perceived control over their own life (Stewart 1997). One of the participants in this study described getting back some element of control after six weeks, perhaps this was an indication of her changing volition, thoughts around 'this is worth it', 'I am getting good at this'. Kielhofner and Forsyth (1997) state:

'Each day's new experiences can reinforce, challenge and elaborate upon existing dispositions and self-knowledge. Hence volition is always under construction' (p105).

Motherhood is an identity, an experience, and an institution (Letherby and Earle 2001) and as Letherby has argued, it is 'defined by a very particular relationship between a women and an infant' (Letherby 2001 p22). However, this identity and the relationship between mother and child, are established through the role of mothering and the range of activities that a part of the mothering role. Therefore, activities such as taking the baby to the park begin to establish a new mother's place in society and the world (Kielhofner 2002). This is supported by Wilcock (1998) who argues that through the process of doing, an identity is established, and through occupation individuals are capable of change. In addition the findings suggest a need to engage in occupations which connected the participants to their social and economic community (Turner 2002)

The findings give clear evidence that a post-natal occupational life has been established. What is less clear is the point at which the tasks and activities described, such as walks to the park, changing nappies or attending mother and baby groups become part of an established routine relating to a particular role, and therefore contributing to a changing identity (Christiansen 1999; Kielhofner 2002).

Participants in this study were asked to reflect over a period of two and a half years. The findings illustrate some commonality in the tasks and activities in which participants engaged post motherhood. However, the manner in which activities were performed and the priority given to each activity indicated individual difference. For example, one mother's choice of activity was ensuring she rested for a few hours every day and did not plan a structure to her day, whilst another mother, chose to spend her day 'doing' activities with her baby and devised a rigid structure every day. Some mothers had feelings of immensely enjoying the new role straight after the birth of the baby, whilst others described being overwhelmed as they adjusted to the new role. This suggests that although motherhood is a continuing process, every individual adapts in their own time and in their own way, thus supporting the commonly held view that every individual is unique (Lamport et al 2001; Kielhofner 2002; Turner 2002).

A lifestyle of engagement in occupations of different categories, deemed central to an individual's health and well-being (Wilcock 1993), was evident for the participants pre-motherhood. Engagement in a balance of productivity, leisure, self-care and rest occupations is less evident post-motherhood. Although it is also worth noting that leisure activities such as reading and gardening are, or can be, done in the home, whereas going to the gym or participating in sport are usually done outside the home. As previous research suggests, becoming a mother ties women to the home and to activities within the home (Oakley, 1979). However participants described voluntary participation in occupations that were 'goal directed' and considered 'meaningful' to them (AOTA 1993 p1081).

Various factors have been outlined throughout this study which may have limited the conclusions drawn. The study is based on a mixed-method design although it draws

predominantly on a qualitative approach. Clearly, the sample size for the quantitative data was extremely small were statistical generalisations intended. However, this is an exploratory study which does not seek to make statistical generalisations of this kind. The study was also limited in terms of representation within the study group, as it was a convenience sample. Only White British married women are represented and only one geographical 'middle class' location in the UK was targeted. The findings can, therefore, not be generalised to other groups of women, for example, women from minority ethnic groups, women who are not married, or 'working class' women.

The relationship between 'occupation and mothers' is a relatively under investigated phenomenon. This study has aimed to explore the changes in the occupational lives of first time mothers within the first two and a half years post-natally. It is envisaged this small study may attract other researchers to further explore this phenomenon using different methods or a larger sample size to further develop understanding. Further study might include:

- Measuring 'new mothers' occupational patterns in the areas of self-care, productivity and leisure.
- Exploring occupational changes after the arrival of a second child.
- Exploring activities, which new mothers choose to do and activities they feel obliged to do and to further explore the concept of 'choice' in relation to this.
- Exploring new mothers' attitudes towards change/imbalance of occupation - positive or negative experience?
- Examining the perceived issues in relation to 'occupational change and health' from a new mother's experience.
- Comparing the occupational lives of mothers who adjust into motherhood with ease with mothers who have more difficulty.

## **Conclusion**

Many women's lives are productivity dominant (Doyal, 1999). However, this study suggests that new mothers' occupational lives are especially productivity dominant, in that much of their time is spent in paid employment and performing homecare/family care activities. Their occupational lives are also obligatory dominant, for example, new mothers are performing activities they need to do to enable them to fulfil their role as mother. Whilst they may be 'choosing' to perform these activities, there is evidence showing that this is at the expense of other activities which they chose to do pre-motherhood and to which some of the women hope to return to post-natally. Activities commonly defined as 'leisure' still occur but they centre around the home and, especially, the baby. Leisure, or 'play' activities that occur outside the home, or which exclude the baby, are less likely to be engaged in once the individual has become a mother.

In conclusion, although this paper is based on the data of a small scale study, the findings indicate that the occupational lives of first time mothers do change in both the short and longer term. Over time, new mothers were able to establish new patterns of occupation, through which, the role of mother formed a part of their self identity. The tasks, activities and occupations undertaken to perform this role became part of their established routines and habits resulting in these occupations becoming intensely meaningful.

**Table 1** Participant Information at time of research interview

NAME	AGE	ETHNICITY	MARITAL STATUS	HOURS IN PAID EMPLOYMENT	JOB TITLE
Debbie	33	White/British	Married	21 hours (3 days)	Teacher
Jenny	37	White /British	Married	Nil	Homemaker/ Reflexologist
Melanie	28	White/British	Married	37 hours (full-time)	Accountant
Sarah	29	White/British	Married	22 hours (3 days)	Visiting Officer
Sharon	42	White/British	Married	14 hours (2 days)	Teacher
Sinead	32	White/British	Married	21 hours (3 days)	Social Worker

**Table 2.** Frequency of engagement in interests (n=6)

<b>Interests</b>	<b>Pre Motherhood</b>	<b>Post Motherhood</b>
Gardening	4	5
Sewing/needle work	4	0
Playing cards	1	0
Foreign languages	3	0
Church activities	3	1
Radio	3	4
Walking	5	2
Car repair	1	0
Writing	1	1
Dancing	3	1
Golf	1	0
Football	4	1
Listening to pop music	5	4
Puzzles	1	1
Holiday activities	5	3
Pets/livestock	4	3
Movies	6	2
Listening to classical music	4	2
Speeches/lectures	3	0
Swimming	6	3
Bowling	1	0
Visiting	5	3
Mending	1	1
Checkers/chess	1	0
Barbecues	6	3
Reading	6	5
Travelling	5	2
Parties	6	1
Housecleaning	6	5
Television	6	6
Concerts	5	0
Pottery	1	0
Camping	3	0
Laundry/Ironing	5	5
Politics	3	0
Home decorating	6	5
Pubs/clubs	5	1
Singing	2	0
Clothes	5	3
Handicrafts	3	1
Hairstyling	3	2
Cycling	3	2
Attending plays	5	0
Bird watching	1	0
Dating	1	0
Home repairs	3	4
Exercise	6	2
Pool	2	0
Driving	6	6
Child care	5	6
Tennis	1	0
Cooking/baking	6	6
Basketball	1	0
History	3	0
Science	1	0
Shopping	6	6
Photography	3	2
Painting/drawing	1	0

**Table 3** Frequency of new mothers' participation in roles and the value placed on these roles (n=6)

<b>Role</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Future</b>	<b>Somewhat Valuable</b>	<b>Very Valuable</b>
Student	5	0	2	1	4
Worker	6	5	6	2	4
Volunteer	4	0	2	2	4
Caregiver	1	6	4	0	5
Home Maintainer	6	6	6	1	5
Friend	6	6	5	0	6
Family Member	6	6	5	0	6
Religious Participant	3	2	2	2	2
Hobbyist	3	1	2	3	0
Participant in Organisations	4	3	2	2	1
Other	0	0	0	0	0
Average:	7.3	5.8	7.0		
Range:	4 - 9	5 - 7	5 - 10		

## References

- American Occupational Therapy Association (1993) Position paper: Purposeful activity. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, **47** 1081-1082.
- American Occupational Therapy Association (1995) Position paper: Occupation. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, **49** 1015-1018.
- Atkinson, R.L. Atkinson, R.C. Smith, E. and Bem, D. (1990) *Introduction to Psychology*. 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Publishers.
- Barclay, L., Everitt, L., Rogan F. (1997) Becoming a mother- an analysis of women's experience of early motherhood. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, (**25**) 4 719-728.
- Bee, H. (1998) *Lifespan Development*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Longman incorporated.
- Blair, S. (2000) The Centrality of Occupation during Life Transitions. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, **63** 5 231-237.
- Blaxter, M. (1990) *Health and Lifestyles*. London: Routledge.
- Bowling, A. (1997) *Research Methods in Health*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Campbell, J. (2001) *Margaret Thatcher: The Grocer's Daughter*. London: Pimlico.
- Christiansen, C. (1999) Defining Lives: Occupation as Identity: An essay on Competence, Coherence, and the Creation of Meaning. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (**53**) 6 547-558.
- Creswell, J (2003) *Research Design – Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Incorporated.
- Doyal, L. (1999) Women and Domestic Labour: Setting a Research Agenda. In: N. Daykin and L. Doyal (eds) *Health and Work: Critical Perspectives*. London: Macmillan.
- Earle, S. (2002) Factors affecting the initiation of breastfeeding: Implications for breastfeeding promotion. *Health Promotion International*, (**17**) 3) 206 – 214.
- Earle, S. and Letherby, G. (eds) (2003) *Gender, Identity and Reproduction: social perspectives*. London: Palgrave.
- Fidler, G. and Fidler, J. (1978) Doing and Becoming: Purposeful Action and Self-Actualisation. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (**32**) 5 305-310.
- Fine, S (1980) *The Richness of Activity*. American Occupational Therapy Association. Video.
- Green, J. and Thorogood, N. (2004) *Qualitative Methods for Health Research*. London: Sage.



Horne, J. (1997) *The Phenomena of Human Sleep*. [online] Loughborough Sleep Research Centre: Loughborough University. Available from: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/hu/groups/sleep/karger.htm> [Accessed 19 March 2003].

Kaufman, S. (1988) Illness, biography, and the interpretation of self following a stroke. *J Aging Stud*; 2(3):127-140.

Kielhofner, G. (2002), *Model of Human Occupation*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Maryland: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.

Kielhofner, G. and Forsyth, K. (1997) The Model of Human Occupation: an Overview of Current Concepts. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (60) 3 103 –110.

Kielhofner, G. and Neville, A. (1983) The modified interest checklist. Unpublished manuscript, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago IL. Cited in Kielhofner, G. (2002), *Model of Human Occupation*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Maryland: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.

Lamport, N., Coffey, M. and Hersch, G. (2001), *Activity Analysis and Application*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Thorofare, NJ: Slack Incorporated.

Larson, E. (2000) Mothering: Letting Go of the Past Ideal and Valuing the Real. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 6 54 (3).

Letherby, G. (2003) Battle of the Gametes: Cultural Representations of 'Medically' Assisted Conception. In: S. Earle and G. Letherby (eds) *Gender, Identity and Reproduction: social perspectives*. London: Palgrave, pp. 50-65.

Mays N, Pope C. (1996) *Qualitative Research in Health Care*. London: British Medical Journal Publishing Group.

Oakley, A. (1979) *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.

Oakley, A. (1980) *Women Confined. Towards a Sociology of Childbirth*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.

Oakley, A. (1997) Introduction. In: Gowdridge, C., Williams, A.S. and Wynn, M. (Eds) *Mother Courage, Letters from Mothers in Poverty at the End of the Century*. London: Penguin Books.

Oakley, F. Kielhofner, G. and Barris, R. (1985) An occupational therapy approach to assessing psychiatric patients' adaptive functioning. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 39, 147-154.

Reed, K. and Sanderson, S. (1999) *Concepts of Occupational Therapy*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Maryland: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.

Rogan, F. Shmied, V. Barclay, L. Everitt, L. and Wyllie, A. (1997) 'Becoming a mother' – developing a new theory of early motherhood. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 25 877-885.

Stewart, S. (1997) Loneliness, Loss and Grief: An Experience of Old Age. *British Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, (4) 10 546– 549.

Turner, A. Foster, M. and Johnson, S. (1996) *Occupational Therapy and Physical Dysfunction*. 4th Edition. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone.

Turner, A., (2002) Occupation for therapy. In: Turner, A. Foster, M. and Johnson, S.(2002) *Occupational Therapy and Physical Dysfunction*. 5th Edition. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone.

Whiteford, G. (2000) Occupational Deprivation: Global Challenge in the New Millennium. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (63) 5 201-204.

Wilcock, A. (1993) A Theory of the Human Need for Occupation. *Occupational Science: Australia*, (1) 1 17–24.

Woodward, K. (1997) *Identity and Difference*. London: Sage.

Wilcock, A. Chelin, M. Hall, M. Hamley, N. Morrison, B. Scrivener, L. Townsend, M. Treen, K. (1997) The relationship between occupational balance and health: a pilot study. *Occupational Therapy International*, 4 (1) 17-30.

Wilcock, A. (1998) Reflections on doing, being and becoming. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (65) 5 248 – 256.

Yerxa, E. (2000) Confessions of an Occupational Therapist who became a Detective. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (63) 5 192-199.

Zemke, R. and Clark, F. (1996) *Occupational Science – The Evolving Discipline*. Philadelphia. F. A. Davis Company.